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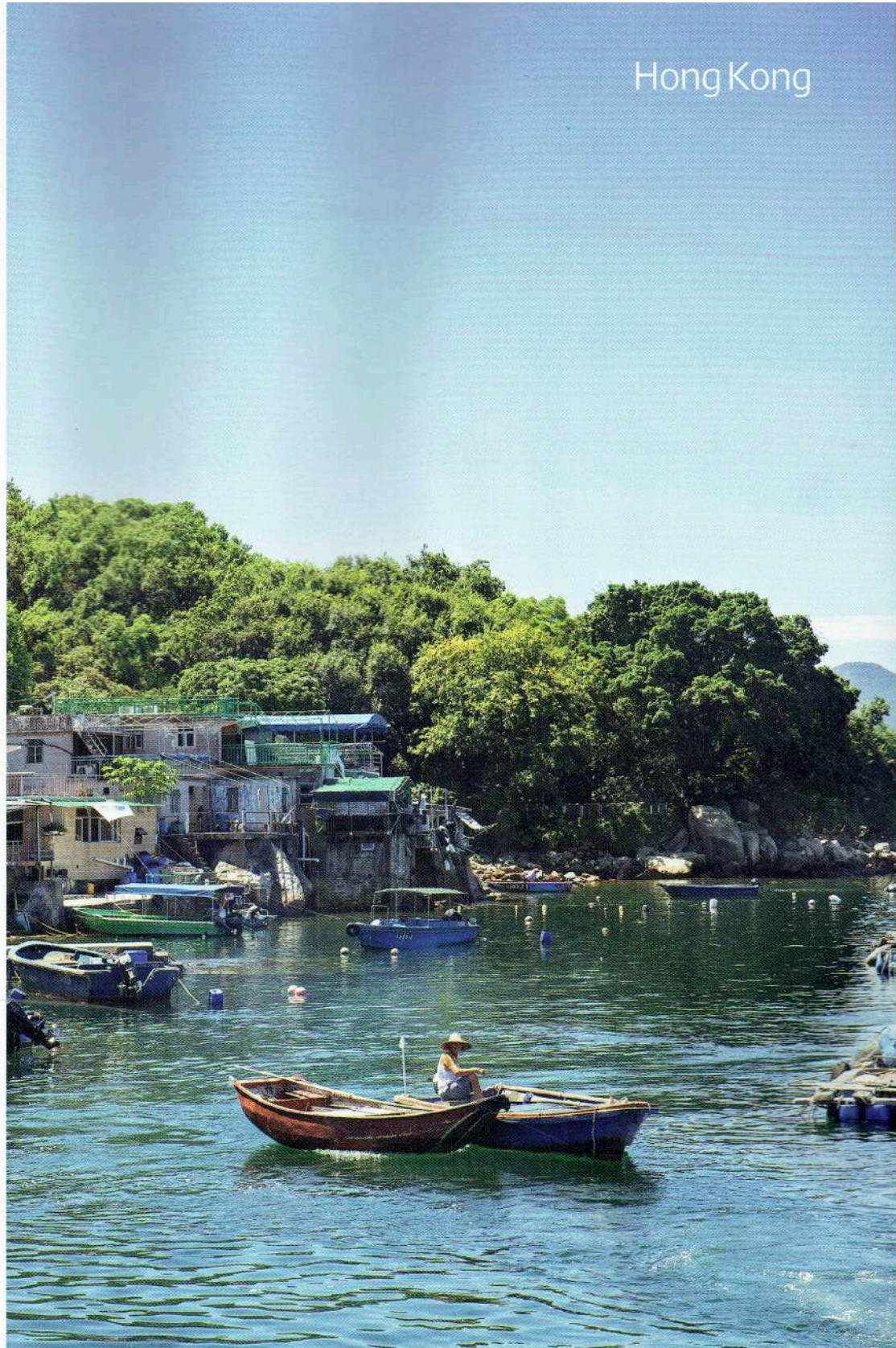
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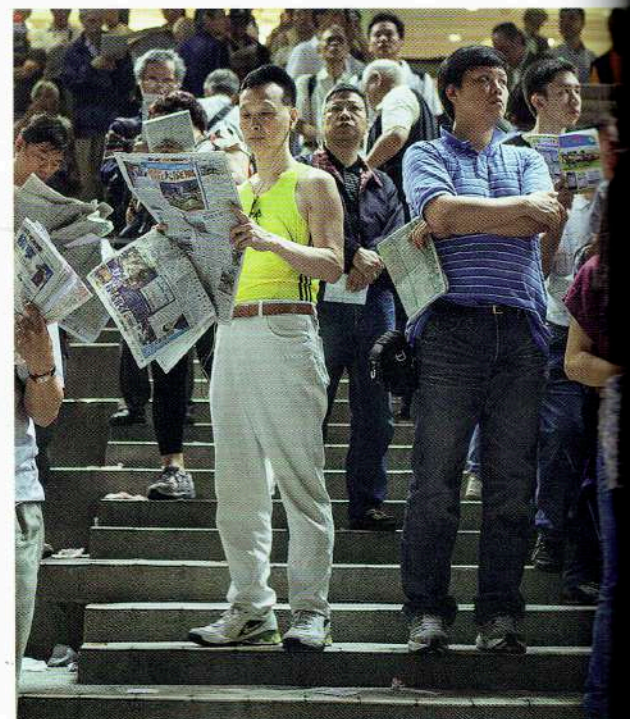
FORTUNE KOOKY

Hong Kong isn't *all* futuristic high-rises and modern finance. It's a strange, ancient city, too — of gambling, gifts to the gods, and powdered gecko, said to cure asthma. By **Stanley Stewart**

Photography: **Cedric Arnold**



Tall storeys: Hong Kong cityscape; fishing boats off Tap Mun, aka Grass Island



Hong Kong has two identities, the yin and yang of oriental philosophy. Behind the shiny steel-and-glass towers of this sophisticated international city, there beats a very traditional Chinese heart. In the back alleys, away from the multinational offices and shopping malls of global brands, is a society with ancient roots, obsessed with omens and portents, and wildly imaginative about medical practices. Hong Kong may be one of the great markets of international finance, but it is also where worshippers turn up at temples with elaborate cooked lunches for the gods and where ground-up centipedes are used to treat excessive wind. It's a city where mourners burn fake currency drawn on the Bank of Hell to appease the 'hungry ghosts' of the dead, and where scaffolders will not risk turning up for work if they have seen someone washing their hair the previous evening. Rush hour is much enlivened by elderly citizens who like

to stand close to the traffic so the passing cars will run over the evil spirits at their heels, while *feng shui*, the geomancer's art, is still central to the design of the latest skyscrapers. The lobby layout of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank had to be revised when it was realised that the alignment of the escalators was inauspicious. Down at the Canal Road flyover you can even hire a little old lady to beat up your enemy. Practising the traditional art of 'villain-bashing', or *da siu yan*, the women make paper cut-outs of your love rival, bullying boss or noisy neighbour, then beat them with a shoe while chanting curses.

In a gloomy amphitheatre of tenements in Kowloon, beyond the bird market and a shop selling Strong China Penis Pills, I discovered the temple of Wong Tai Sin. Soothsayers, fortune-tellers and palm-readers gather like gulls round the city's temples to offer guidance to eager pilgrims. I had tickets for



WOMEN MAKE PAPER CUT-OUTS OF YOUR LOVE RIVAL OR BULLYING BOSS, THEN BEAT THEM WITH A SHOE

Happy Valley, Hong Kong's racetrack, and thought I might pick up a hot tip from a crystal ball.

Here, Chinese gods are not so much worshipped as supplicated. People arrived bearing gifts, like petitioners at a feudal court. No-one was here for moral guidance; everyone had come to cut a deal with gods who held the invisible strings of luck. In the courtyard before the main shrine, between brass urns and stone lions, they settled in for a few rounds of genuflection then laid out tempting picnics, hoping for a bit of help with exam results, career prospects, lottery numbers or a new love interest.

In one of the long passages around the temple court, among the soothsayers' stalls, I found a local

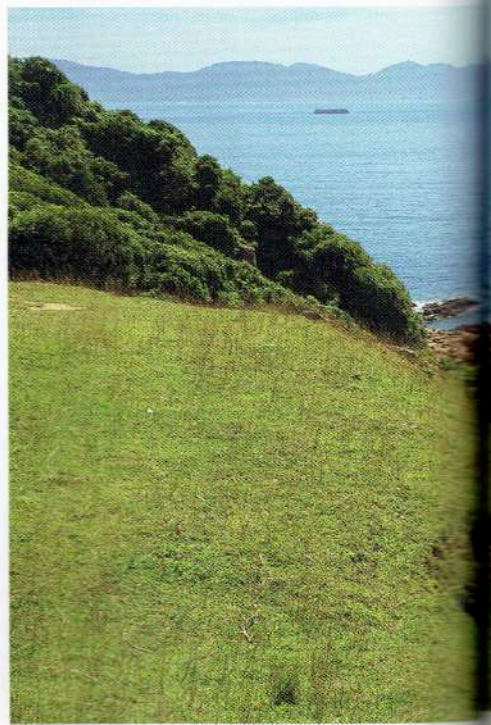
Mystic Meg, a woman with gold earrings and wild hair, and booked myself in for a face reading.

'Your face is tree-shaped,' she said. 'It is governed by the properties of wood.'

This was interesting but not really what I was after. A wooden face was neither here nor there when it came to the three o'clock at Happy Valley.

But there was more. My nose apparently was supportive and promised success. My forehead indicated a good memory and a lack of vanity, and my ears a tendency to stubbornness. My cheekbones were a disappointment – too bony – and didn't say much for my nerve in a crisis. I had good lines for a writer, but she thought I might be >

Divine light: above, worshipping in one of Hong Kong's many temples. Opposite, from far left, outside Wong Tai Sin temple; villager from Grass Island; punters at the Happy Valley racecourse



better off financially going into the business side – publishing or printing – advice that hardly needed a mystic. In the end I managed only to elicit a lucky number from Meg – eight – and set off for the races.

Happy Valley is the perfect amalgam of Hong Kong's two traditions. The thoroughbreds are all expats, flown in First Class, from Europe and Australia, and stabled in five-star facilities, with air-con, swimming pools, piped music, imported oats and the tightest security in the city. And the passion, the excitement of Hong Kong's tracks is borne along by the Chinese love of gambling.

In Canton, in the old days, it was said that Chinese housewives could hardly buy a cabbage without offering to shoot craps with the greengrocer, double or quits. On race days, Hong Kong's pulse is marked by the crack of the starter's pistol at Happy Valley. All over the city you can see anxious punters pause in their daily chores to turn up the radio as the horses come into the last straight.

A veil will be drawn over my own fortunes at Happy Valley. Suffice to say Miss Piggy was not the horse that so many tipsters believed her to be, and her number – eight – could not have been the lucky eight that Meg was referring to. But dropping a few quid on a 12-to-1 outsider is a small price to pay for a night at Happy Valley. The facilities are astonishing and the evening race meetings are magical. Beneath floodlights, the track glows as green and lush as an Irish furlong, surrounded by an arena of skyscrapers, their lit windows glittering like constellations against the dark skies.

Beyond the hyper-modern city, Hong Kong seems to be populated with hypochondriacs obsessed with indigestion, flatulence and excessive sputum. Nothing here evokes the world of a traditional China as powerfully as the medicine shops, irresistible palaces of the weird and wonderful, full of exotic cures and fabulous ingredients. Over lunch in revolving restaurants urban sophisticates show each other their tongues and discuss their inner meridians. Account executives stuck in traffic jams ring their doctors to order another course of weasel liver.

Browsing the pharmacies, I found lotions with inexhaustible properties. Apply for two or three days to the infected area, declared one confident label, for the relief of colds, flu, diarrhoea, inflammation, seasickness, gout, hangover and 'discomfort caused by forest smog and epidemics'. There were crocodile bile pills for the relief of asthma, and gastro-intestinal pills – called Trumpet Brand – for the relief of wind.

In the traditional medicine shops, things got even weirder. Ancient clerks shuffled back and forth weighing out mysterious substances. There were terrapin shells for renal dysfunction and lung nourishment, ground gecko for asthma, seal's testicles to replenish vital essences, birds' nests for facial nutrition, dried hornets to cure children of a fear of the dark, and sea horses for low cholesterol levels. Good health suddenly seemed so dull.

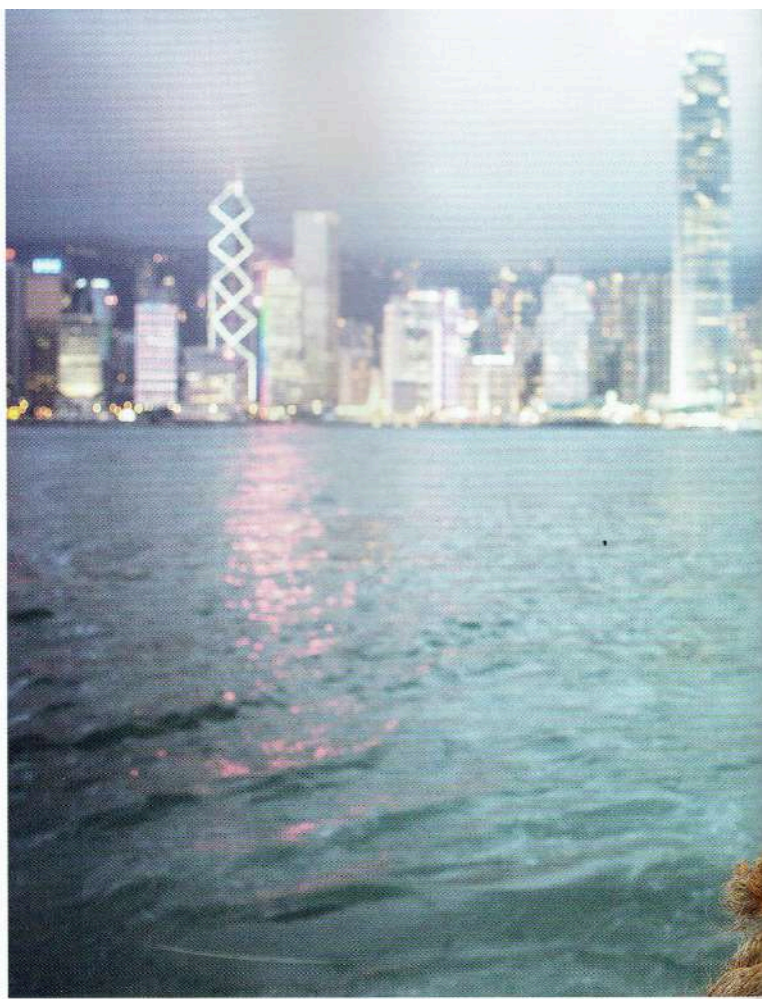
Chinese medicine reserves its most exotic ingredients for the bed chamber so, feigning sexual inadequacy, I took a journey of discovery, to find what wonders were prescribed. I booked a translator, made an appointment with a doctor and prepared to enter the surreal world of Chinese remedies. Which seemed amusing, until the translator turned up. A woman in her early thirties, Yu Pan was immaculately dressed, with eyes you fall into and a soft throaty laugh. I panicked at the idea that she

EDITOR'S TIP

Fancy your chances at Happy Valley Racecourse? You can book in advance for day and night races (www.bookingrc.hkjc.com). There's a choice of places to eat and drink – and tourists get a first glass free!



Doctor's orders: clockwise from top, a medicine shop vendor prepares a prescription; Grass Island; bell ornaments at Wong Tai Sin temple; side-street fortune-tellers in Kowloon



THE DOCTOR GATHERED MY HANDS IN HIS LONG FINGERS. 'SLIPPERY PULSES,' HE SIGHED. 'NOT GOOD.'

would be soon translating the details of my supposed sexual failings into Cantonese.

From an alley off Wing Lok Street, I followed Yu Pan up the narrow stairs to the consulting rooms with dread. To my horror, I found the waiting room and the consulting room were one and the same. A row of glum patients sat on divans of lacquered wood like medical students on job experience while the doctor conducted his examinations a few feet away. The patients had mysterious complaints. The first woman declared that she was too wet and the doctor prescribed rose petals. The next was too hot and got buffalo horn. A third was a stooped old lady in silk pyjamas. Nearly deaf, she shouted her complaint across the desk: HAEMORRHOIDS. The doctor gave her honeysuckle flowers. I was unclear what she was meant to do with them.

When the doctor called me forward, Yu Pan and I approached the desk like a newly married couple. A slight bespectacled man, the doctor gathered my hands in his long fingers and laid them across a little red cushion to feel my pulses. There were three in each wrist, he said, governing different aspects of the body: lungs, digestion, kidneys and so on. He tapped and probed them with long investigative fingers. He was not simply feeling their rate, he explained, but also their strength, their rhythms and their pattern. He made my pulses sound like symphonies, some revelation of the soul.

'Slippery pulses,' he sighed. 'Not good.' Then he popped the question. 'What has brought you to see me. What is your problem?'

The other patients leaned imperceptibly forward. Yu Pan crossed her legs with a whisper of nylon stockings. My nerve failed me.

'Anxiety. You know, general... anxiety. I feel anxious.'

He nodded knowingly. 'Imbalance of the water element,' he said. 'I can feel the anxiety in your pulses. And I believe your digestive tract is also in difficulty.'

He took up a brush and in long graceful characters painted my prescription on a sheet of rice paper. 'Ginseng and lavender for anxiety,' he said. 'And cuttlefish bone for the digestive-tract issue. Come back in six weeks.'

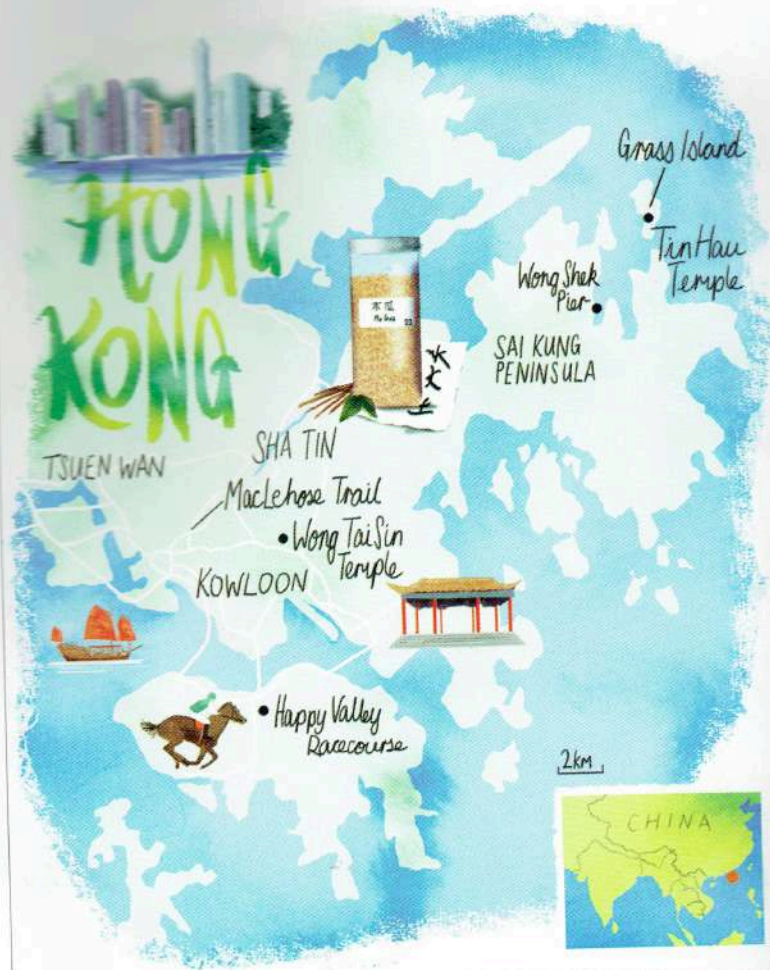
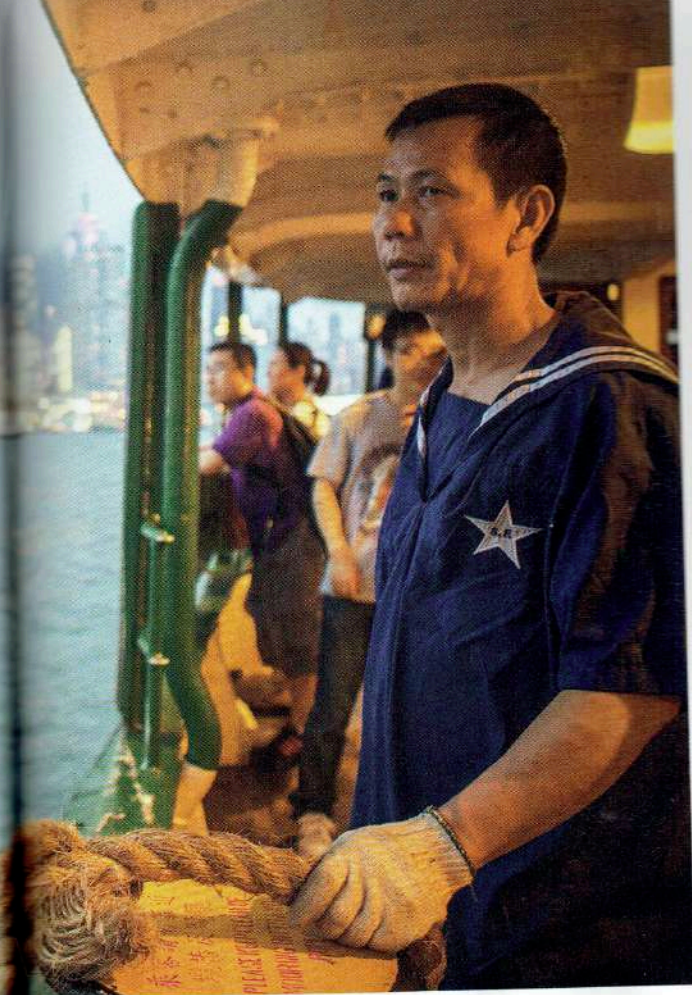
My complaint, I realised, was plausible enough, in a city where people live on top of one another – literally, as dizzy ranks of high-rise apartments crowd the horizons. You could be forgiven for thinking that there was nothing but concrete from the harbour to the mainland borders. Yet to the north of Kowloon, the New Territories are a revelation. Here specially designated parks protect the endless rolling countryside from development. Barely half an hour from the skyscrapers and the shoppers you can find yourself on an empty beach, a hiking trail or at the gates of a traditional walled village.

I took a ferry to Tsuen Wan, then climbed through tiered allotments to the MacLehose Trail, named after the

HEALTH CHECK

Most ingredients for traditional Chinese medicine now come from sustainable sources and farmed stocks — the International Fund for Animal Welfare (ifaw.org) is worth contacting for more information (and peace of mind)

Face time: sign advertising face- and palm-reading services; aboard the ferry from the Central district to Kowloon



map: Scott Jessop

British governor who created this splendid park system in the late '70s. One minute I was looking down at the skyscrapers of Tsuen Wan, picturesque against ships on water, the next I was in a world of birdsong and bamboo groves, where I stood watching sea eagles rise like ghosts on the thermals.

Soon I was on a bus bound for Wong Shek Pier, on the north side of the Sai Kung peninsula. An ancient boat-woman took me to Tap Mun Chau, or Grass Island, one of the most traditional of Hong Kong's outcrops, barely touched by development. An easterly wind blew across rolling downs of palm bushes and cows. The sea crashed on rocks, and fishing boats were laying nets in a heavy swell. I was barely 20km from urban Kowloon but it felt a world away. Down in the village old ladies in silk pyjamas were betting their pensions on *mahjong* as the slap of the tiles filled every alleyway. Up at Tin Hau temple, a man was unpacking food for the gods – oranges, apples, a roast duck, cans of San Miguel beer.

I could have stayed all week. Late afternoon I took a ferry back to Sha Tin. It was the last run of the day and I was the only passenger. Weekends can be busy, the captain said. But during the week, almost no-one comes this way.

'Out here you forget about Hong Kong and rush-rush,' said the ferryman. 'Rush-rush is very bad for the inner meridians.'

As the sun set we slowly rounded the headland of Tolo Channel. Blue hills fell from the heights of Mount Hallowes into the embrace of crimson bays. If I really needed a cure for anxiety in Hong Kong, I'd found it. No need for ginseng or lavender or a gift to the gods out here, a million miles from the high pressure and the high-rises. ■

Get Me There

Go independent

BA (ba.com) has daily direct flights to Hong Kong from Heathrow, from £449 return. **Cathay Pacific** (cathaypacific.com) flies from Gatwick, from £469 return; as of June 2018, it will also fly non-stop from Dublin, from £613 return.

Where to stay

The Pottinger (00 852 2308 3188, thepottinger.com; doubles from £220, B&B), in the Central district, is stylish and clubby with a nod to a colonial vibe. **Hotel Icon** (00 852 3400 1000, hotel-icon.com; doubles from £210, B&B), on the Kowloon side, has a rooftop pool and views of Hong Kong Island across the bay. Also in Kowloon, above the Langham Place Mall, the **Cordis** (00 852 3552 3388, cordishotels.com; doubles from £142, room only) has a two-Michelin-star restaurant and swimming pool. The recently opened **Kerry Hotel** (00 853 2252 5888, shangri-la.com; doubles from £156, room only), sits right on the Kowloon

waterfront, overlooking the grand sweep of Victoria Harbour.

Go packaged

Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com) has a five-night 'Chinese Medicine' tour in Hong Kong from £2,250pp, B&B, including flights, private transfers, English-speaking guides and a room at the fashionable Upper House. **Wendy Wu Tours** (0800 144 5600, wendywutours.co.uk) can organise a five-day stay in a Kowloon four-star, from £1,025pp, B&B, including a half-day island tour and flights. Or **expedia.com** has five nights in a five-star, from £1,953pp, with flights from Birmingham or Manchester.

Further Information

See discoverhongkong.com, the Hong Kong Tourism Board's excellent website, for a raft of guided tours of the city, including temples, Happy Valley and the traditional medicine trade, as well as maps and guides to the parks of the New Territories.